

Agave farmers, or *jimadors*, skilfully harvest the heart of the blue agave plant, which looks like a giant pineapple, to prepare tequila.



# Bottoms Up in Mexico

A TIPSY TRIP TO TEQUILA TOWN BY MARGOT BIGG

**“T**his one’s got nice legs,” my companion Marc announced, holding a snifter containing a few gold-hued ounces of Jose Cuervo’s Reserva de la Familia tequila up to a lamp. As he swirled the concoction around in his glass, he watched the drops streak down the side to form new legs. He hovered his nose above the rim, and performed the little breathe-and-sip ritual I’d only ever seen done with wine.

Jose Cuervo, the world’s best-known tequila, is made at La Rojeña, a distillery in the Mexican town of Santiago de Tequila, northwest of the city of Guadalajara. We’d spent the better part of the last hour touring the facility, learning about the process of tequila manufacturing, and even tasting a

saccharine chunk of the heart of the agave plant, from which the liquor town’s eponymous spirit is made.

We ended our tour with a special treat in La Rojeña’s chilly, subterranean cellars. The gray stone archways and gigantic oak barrels made the space look more like a medieval crypt in France than a vault full of tequila in the middle of the Mexican desert. The half-dozen

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of us on the tour crowded around a long wooden table. I apprehensively accepted my glass of the company’s special reserve tequila. I’m not much of a drinker, and on the occasions where I do imbibe the hard stuff, I usually make sure it’s diluted to the point of near-tastelessness with ample servings of tonic or fruit juice. “It’s meant for sipping,” our guide told us, but I still held my breath before taking the glass to my lips, expecting it to burn through my mouth and into my oesophagus. Instead, the oak barrel-aged tequila was sweet and smooth, like brandy. I’d have willingly sipped through a second one.

A fermented, agave-based drink known as pulque has been consumed in the central part of Mexico for millennia. Tequila, however, is a much newer



Tequila is aged in wooden barrels (top left) used previously for wine, whisky, or bourbon; A shot of tequila is usually followed by sucking on a wedge of lime to cut its sharpness (top right). But this is not necessary while drinking smooth, aged tequila; Besides tastings, a trip to the distillery may also include live mariachi music and performances (bottom).

concoction; it's essentially a variety of mescal, a distilled agave drink that gained popularity in the early 16th century, during the Spanish Conquest. Tequila is distinguished from other mescals by the fact that it's made only from the blue agave varietal of the desert succulent. Like many wines, the appellation can only be given to spirits made in specifically designated areas of Mexico, most of which are in the immediate vicinity of Tequila.

The liquor was first developed here in 1795 by Jose Cuervo's founder Don

Jose Antonio de Cuervo. However, it wasn't sold commercially until the 1880s. Today, an entire tourism industry has sprung up around the distillery. Neighbouring producers also offer tours and boutique hotels have popped up to accommodate the increasing number of visitors. In 2012, the company even launched the Jose Cuervo Express, a special, upscale train that transports visitors from Guadalajara to Tequila and back again.

A few shots of tequila and a couple of margaritas later I found myself on this

train, along with a few hundred other tourists, most of whom seemed to have sampled at least as much as I had. As the train rumbled leisurely through the desert, I stared out of the window, watching agave farmers, or *jimadors*, at work in fields.

I was on the verge of dozing off, when a voice cried out over the loudspeaker: "Time to play *La Loteria!*" The traditional Mexican game, similar to tombola, dominated the rest of our ride to the city. Within seconds, I was given a scorecard, a few kernels of dried corn to use as markers, and a fresh lime margarita that I hadn't ordered, but was nevertheless expected to chug down. Though Tequila was behind us, the party clearly wasn't over.

#### THE VITALS

**Orientation** Santiago de Tequila is in central Mexico. The nearest international airport is at Guadalajara (82 km southeast). **Cost** A day tour with round-trip train ride from Guadalajara on the Jose Cuervo Express costs MXN1,800/₹6,950 for adults and MXN1,550/₹5,980 for children. Tour, drinks, lunch, and admission to a Mexican dance show are included in the price. Trains depart from Guadalajara at 9 a.m. arriving at 11 a.m. Return trains depart Tequila at 6 p.m. and arrive in Guadalajara at 8 p.m. (*more details at [www.mundocuervo.com](http://www.mundocuervo.com)*). **Stay** For a longer visit, staying overnight at Solar de las Ánimas is recommended (*[www.solardelasanimas.com](http://www.solardelasanimas.com); rooms from \$130/₹8,650*). ●